

Bullshit philosophy

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Harry Frankfurt establishes the presence of bullshit in society as one of the prevalent factors in preventing the mode of ascertaining the truth. In his work *On Bullshit*, he first establishes its meaning, apart from the derogatory and misused interpretations of what bullshit is. Frankfurt first utilizes the definition from the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), which defines bullshit as nonsense, rubbish, trivial, or insincere talk or writing. Bullshit is then utilized as a noun that alludes to things, arguments or statements that does not contain any meaning while the act of bullshitting entails bluffing, to talk nonsense, etc.

Further, Frankfurt attempts to distinguish of the notions on lying and bullshit wherein to lie is a misappropriation of the truth while bullshit or the bullshitter has no concern for the truth at all. We must first have a clear literal understanding of the word bullshit. In its literal sense, it is the excrement of a cow or bull. The understanding of bullshit lies with societal use as a derogatory term aimed to imply nonsense and irrelevant talking or doing. Frankfurt then compares the origin and use of bullshit to the use of ‘ humbug’.

In an essay by Max Black on the use of humbug, the word is closely related in terms of the notions, manner, and nature to that of bullshit. According to Frankfurt, the word humbug shares a close meaning with the word bullshit although the two words are used differently. “ It is more polite as well as less intense, to say humbug than to say bullshit” (Frankfurt, 2005, n. p.). Thus, humbug is defined as a deceptive misinterpretation, short or close to lying through a pretentious word, action, feeling, thoughts, and attitudes. Humbug is used with the intention to deceive, similar to that of a lie.

However, a lie accounts for a false statement to declare a lie; or in other cases, a person's statement may be false but intends for it to be accepted as truth. Black furthers the argument on humbug that it can also be categorized as a speech and action as well; that humbug can be found in not only in words but also in action. In addition, humbug does not necessarily require pretentiousness as a requisite for the behavior or speech. Humbug is then synonymous with being pretentious. Humbug also constitutes misrepresentation of the individual's thoughts and feelings.

To misrepresent the self means to naturally deceive the person by concealing what is present in the individual's state of mind. By telling a lie however, the person misrepresents two things: that is the present argument (what he is talking about) and the state of mind (what he is thinking). To lie means that there is already a false conception of an argument, and the liar makes that argument true and universal which essentially construes a lie. The lie works, and the person is twice deceived since there is a deception of what is given or the object of lie, and the state of mind which remains mysterious to the deceived person.

The difference then, between humbug and lie is that humbug does not necessitate deception but rather to give a false impression on the state of mind. Humbug is more on misinterpretation when the speaker actually tries to convey something that is true; humbug does not represent what is on the individual's state of mind, which is essential in a lie. Frankfurt gives us an example: " If I lie to you about how much money I have, then I do not thereby make an explicit assertion concerning my beliefs.

Therefore, one might with some plausibility maintain that in telling the lie, I certainly misrepresent what is in my mind. This misrepresentation — as distinct from my misrepresentation of what is in my pocket — is not strictly speaking, a lie at all” (Frankfurt 2005, n. p.). The speaker provides a reasonable basis of belief of the amount of money in the pocket but does not follow that there is no lie with what the person believes. Another example would be the statement “ our great and blessed country, whose founding fathers under divine guidance, created a new beginning for mankind” (Frankfurt, 2005, n. .).

The phrase ‘ pretentious bullshit’ literally defines its meaning and intention. To say pretentious means that it is short of lie while bullshit may mean nonsense. Pretentiousness is then a motive of bullshit rather than an element of the word’s essence. According to Black, the speaker is not lying since to lie means that the intention is to bring about in the audience his beliefs which the speaker regards as false; whether or not the country is great, blessed or whether the founders had divine guidance, and so on.

Thus, it can be derived from the example that the speaker does not intend to falsify history or to necessarily implicate the meaning of the speech, but rather to give an impression on himself, through the speech. The speaker wants to be regarded as a patriot that cares deeply on the country, caring, sensitive, and gives importance to religion. Thus, humbug is merely a personal deception without the necessitated intent of deceiving people with concealed intentions. However, Frankfurt does not believe that humbug (short of lying) can be the definitive nature of bullshit, even with notions on misrepresentation.

Frankfurt then gives an account of the true notion of bullshit through a verse by Ludwig Wittgenstein dedicated to Longfellow. “ In the elder days of art, builders wrought with greatest care. Each minute and unseen part, for the Gods are everywhere” (Frankfurt, 2005, n. p.). The verse is straightforward and clear. According to Frankfurt, these craftsmen were careful and took care in their aspect of work. As such, the craftsmen notion to detail is impeccable though their work would not dictate, they are compelled to perfection since they would be bothered by their conscience.

Then, Frankfurt concludes, that there is no bullshit. Frankfurt then further argues that shit, in itself, is a product that is not crafted to perfection. In reference to the comparison made in the craftsmen allegory, there is no bullshit since the craftsmen are centered on their work to perfection. Frankfurt alludes to the nature of this example to bullshit, that bullshit or the bullshitter may be a carelessly made by-product and a mindless slob respectively. Indeed, the word ‘ shit’ itself is not designed, merely emitted, or dispensed but not certainly made.

Aside from the given truth, the bullshitter has something that wants to be proven or get away with something that posits as a truth. Frankfurt mentions an experience of Ludwig Wittgenstein on the further notions of bullshit on an anecdote by Fania Pascal in Cambridge during the 1930’s. Pascal had her tonsils removed and was resting in a Nursing home and feeling sorry for herself. She remarks that she feels like a dog that has been run over and Wittgenstein remarks she does not know what a dog that has been run over feels like (Frankfurt, 2005).

From this situation, the use of the phrase ‘ sick as a dog’ cannot be a reason to provoke any responses of disgust, as proven wrong by Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein may be trying to provoke her into laughing, trying to insert a hint of irony into his statements. Then again, Pascal may have interpreted his response of disgust into something insulting; thus, Wittgenstein’s actions are misinterpreted. Assuming that Pascal may or may not know how a dog that has been run over feels, she cannot be assumed that she is lying.

Lying would come into question wherein if Pascal would state that the feeling of a run-over dog is good. Thus, there is a concept on the general notion of a given truth — in this case, the temporal feeling of pain, specifically dogs. There is a contradiction of statements — the truth, wherein the feeling of a run-over dog is not good, and Pascal’s lie. However, Wittgenstein, in Pascal’s story, does not intend to make her statements into a lie but his statement is another case of misrepresentation. Pascal indeed does not connote nonsense, and her statements are understandable than complete nonsense.

Furthermore, Pascal may know the feeling of the undesirable feeling of a run-over dog, though she may not have had a first hand experience for herself. Her statements are more likely to be misinterpreted since what she tries to express is an undesirable feeling and specified into a limited experience. Her statement is unique in the sense that her feelings are limited to a specific feeling. She does not feel bad in general, but rather her feeling is that of a run-over dog. To Wittgenstein in the story, Pascal’s statement is bullshit.

Bullshit is then a deviation from a certain truth. Pascal’s statement is merely an assumption of truth but not necessarily truth itself. Her account gives us an implication of a priori knowledge which comes before firsthand

experience itself. Pascal does not think she knows how run-over dog feels, but merely assumes the feeling itself. Her statement may seem only to be made up to describe her feeling, and Frankfurt assumes that the statement may have been acquired from a prior source and she repeats it mindlessly, not giving any consideration on how things are.

According to Frankfurt, this probably triggered the disgust in Wittgenstein's case as he is somewhat intolerant of mindless sayings that do not allude to any given truths for that matter. Though Pascal may have only uttered such statement to appear cheery or good-humored in a terrible state, Wittgenstein was highly intolerant of senseless rambling; her statement was bereft of a conscious attention to pertinent facts. Alluding to the prior example, Frankfurt says that Pascal's statement is "not wrought with greatest care" since she mindlessly blurts out the statement without any thought on basic facts (Frankfurt, 2005, n. .).

Thus, she does not have concern for the truth but only to directly convey her feeling. Frankfurt also takes into account the use of the word bullshit in bullshitting sessions or simply bull sessions. The OED defines it as an informal discussion or talk which involves an informal gathering of people who express different subjects of topics without being judged to be committed on what the person says. Bull sessions do not necessitate an attempt to conclude every idea to be true or not; rather, the aim is to produce a level of experimentation during the discourse.

Basically, bull sessions do not manipulate the truth; truth is absent from the discussions for every topic or subject discussed does not need any evidence of truth, nor does it need any advocacy from the person who might have

brought it up. Frankfurt also relates bullshitting to that of bluffing. Bluffing means to talk nonsense in order to get away with something. Bluffing also shares some similarity with humbug, as it manipulates the truth in order to achieve a certain outcome or effect. According to Frankfurt, bullshitting involves a certain kind of bluff.

To clearly understand, Frankfurt enumerates the following: Lying involves a deliberate utterance of falsehood. Bluffing does not need falsity but more on fakery. To Frankfurt, bluffing is a much more similar comparison to that of lying. “ In order to appreciate this distinction, one must recognize that a fake or a phony need not be, in any respect (apart from authenticity itself) inferior to the real thing. What is not genuine need not also be defective in some other way.

What is wrong with counterfeit is not what it is like, but how it was made” (Frankfurt, 2005, n. .). The bullshitter twists the truth by faking a certain thing but does not mean that the bullshitter can be wrong. To bullshit then is much morally safer than to lie since to bullshit is mainly concerned with nonsense, unlike lying which needs a certain truth to develop a certain falsehood. Frankfurt then gives us a clear definition of what bullshit is, in contrast with lying, humbug and bluffing. What bullshit essentially misrepresents is neither the state of affairs to which it refers nor the beliefs of the speaker concerning that state of affairs.

Those are what lies misrepresent by virtue of being false. The bullshitter may not deceive us or even intend to do so, either about the facts or about what he takes the facts to be. What he does necessarily attempt to deceive us is about his enterprise. His only indispensably distinctive characteristic is that

in a certain way he misrepresent what he is up to (Frankfurt, 2005, n. p.). To lie is to twist and misappropriate the truth. Bullshitting and bluffing are similar because of the nature of intent — that both actions or state are more concerned on being fake rather than being false.

Similar to humbug, bullshitting and bluffing are modes that are used in order to present another fake perception of reality in order to produce a desired effect or outcome. Humbug, as presented by Black in the preceding examples, is similar to bullshit since it involves a subjective intent of deception in order for humbug to work. However, humbug differs in the sense that it still has notions concerning truth since the intent of the speaker is to make believe other people that what he is saying is applicable to himself.

On the other hand, Bullshit does not need the truth, for it only contains nonsense which the bullshitter tries to manipulate fake (not false) arguments in order for it to be accepted. Bullshit is then a representation of a thing that is not concerned with the truth. To bullshit somebody shares similar terms to deception, since there is no presence of truth in the bullshitter's statement(s). What the bullshitter necessarily wants to accomplish is to indulge people into believing what s/he says, without any pretense for the truth.

This can also be considered as a form of deception or close to lying since the bullshitter does not need truth in order to state or argue something. Thus, the bullshitter cannot be considered a liar or lying; therefore a bullshitter's statement does not have any sense since there is no need for statements to be true. Frankfurt first starts his essay that with mention that there is much

bullshit in the world. Applied in the literal sense, it may be taken as the society's loss to appreciate the search for a greater truth rather than manipulating applied truth into false ideologies.

Though the process of acquiring such is in a sense, metaphysical, society resorts to nonsense, which according to Frankfurt's doctrine, is a much graver crime than lying. There can never be a conception of higher or absolute truth however, since there is subjectivity for every individual. From this premise, we can assert that lying comes from subjective intentions in order to satisfy personal needs. Bullshit on the other hand, though can be morally and personally safer than lying, is certainly less acceptable for it does not contain statements that ascertain to the truth.

Thus, to bullshit is to literally promulgate nonsense ideologies that do not require what is true or accepted. Lying is synonymous with deception, and is far a greater moral dilemma than to bullshit. However, Frankfurt's concern is the lack of importance for the truth which, according to him, is essential in societal development. If people can bullshit their way through everything, then there is also a fake development of knowledge. There is no more conception of what truth is. Then that is simply bullshit.